AESCHYLUS

LIFE: Born in 525 B. C., Aeschylus lived to be 69 years old. He was the earliest of the three Athenian tragic dramatists from whose works entire plays survive. (The other two are Euripides and Sophocles.) Aeschylus' family belonged to the old Athenian nobility and, as part of his duties as a citizen, he fought in at least two of the battles in which the Greeks defeated the Persians: Marathon (490 B. C.) and Salamis (480 B. C.). His birthplace was Eleusis, where he probably early became acquainted with the processions and ceremonies associated with the famous shrine of Demeter there. He began writing at an early age: his first play was acted in 499, when he was 26. He is reputed to have written over eighty plays, of which only seven have survived. In the dramatic contests, he is said to have won thirteen victories. He died in Gela, Sicily, in 455 B. C.

DRAMATIC FORMS AND THEMES: In the history of literature for the stage, Aeschylus is famous as the creator of a theatrical tradition which has continued to the present day. Although he had predecessors, of whom very little is known, evidence has convinced many scholars that Aeschylus changed the dramatic tradition he inherited from what was, essentially, choral song into a performance by individual actors. Changes, indeed, may be traced in his own works, of which early and late examples have survived. He should probably be credited with such innovations as increasing the length of dialogue passages (at the expense of the choral lyrics), introducing a second actor, and writing the first trilogy, or group of three plays based on a single story. Such innovations indicate the first steps of the characteristic development of Western drama toward a realistic representation of life. In his early Suppliants, for example, King Pelasgus is little more than the stock heroic figure of a good king; in the later Agamemnon even the minor figure of the Watchman is individualized. By modern standards, of course, the plays of Aeschylus would hardly be called realistic; the quality exists as a change from earlier drama but is embryonic in comparison even to plays by Aeschylus' immediate successors.

The plots of Aeschylus' plays are extremely simple; time and place are not always clear or consistent; the entrances and exits of characters are frequently poorly managed. Such "weaknesses" are usually found in archaic drama, and may, indeed, be necessary concommitants of the spectacle and grandeur which are its more positive qualities. Aeschylus uses elaborate costumes and such visually effective elements as men in armor, chariots, gods, ghosts, tombs, and altars. Such effects, of course, are as partly inaccessible to readers of translations as are the beauty of Aeschylus' poetry and the singing and dancing of the chorus.

Today's reader derives his greatest pleasure from Aeschylus' cosmic viewpoint of the world and from his lofty moral and religious themes. Such themes as the triumph of justice over violence and the punishment of pride and sacrilege are not dead issues for us. Aeschylus' tough-minded attitude also appeals to the modern reader; no falsification or softening of consequences weakens his representation of issues. If sometimes there is a vagueness or unsystematic resolution of these issues, it is because Aeschylus' cast of mind is more poetic than philosophical.

Placing himself with those who view man as an essentially social creature, Aeschylus argues for the necessity of a middle way in which extreme positions must be sacrificed in the name of order. Pride and excessive wealth anger the gods and must be avoided; they are as inimical to social orders as are injustice and violence. The gods must be revered. but the fact must also

be faced that they are severe taskmasters. The essential condition of mankind is sad: Weak, vain, lustful, ambitious man desires to emulate the gods, an impossible goal. To teach man his place, the gods must make him suffer. That man can only acquire wisdom through suffering is a central idea in Aeschylus' tragic vision.

SUPPLIANTS

[about 490 B.C.]

BACKGROUND: Probably the earliest of all surviving Greek dramas, the Suppliants is thought to have been the first play of a tetralogy in which the others were the Egyptians, the Daughters of Danaus, and the Amymone, a satyr-play (see General Introduction).

Zeus once fell in love with a human, Io (see Prometheus Bound), who, after much suffering, bore him a child, Epaphus. Epaphus had two great-grandchildren, Aegyptus and Danaus. Aegyptus had fifty sons and Danaus had fifty daughters. The fifty sons wanted to marry the fifty daughters, but the fifty daughters were frightened by the violent lust of their cousins, and fled with their father to Argos, where they asked King Pelasgus for sanctuary in the temples.

CHARACTERS: DANAUS, father of the fifty girls who compose the CHORUS. PELASGUS, King of Argos. A HERALD from Aegyptus, Danaus' brother.

SETTING: Sacred ground near the shore in Argos.

The fifty daughters of Danaus (the Chorus) pray to Zeus to save them from having to marry Aegyptus' sons. They invoke Zeus because he had once loved their ancestress, Io, who also suffered in strange lands. Praying next to Artemis, goddess of chastity, they swear they will kill themselves if their prayers are not answered. Their father enters and says an armed force is approaching, which turns out to be the King of Argos and his men. King Pelasgus identifies himself and questions them about their history and about their reasons for seeking sanctuary. Pelasgus doubts the justice of their case: legally, the men can claim the women as brides. On the other hand, he respects his obligation to defend suppliants. He decides to consult his townspeople before risking a war with Egypt which might be disastrous; the Chorus threaten to hang themselves from the statues of the gods if he refuses. To do so would pollute the images and bring down the wrath of the gods. The king suggests Danaus see that the suppliant's wands his daughters carry are clearly displayed on the city's altars. Such a display, he hopes, will lead the townspeople to pity them. He also promises to tell Danaus what arguments will most likely persuade the townspeople to espouse his daughters' cause.

The Chorus pray to Zeus again; Danaus returns and says that the townspeople have granted sanctuary. After the Chorus ask blessings on the city of Argos, their father sights the ships of their pursuers nearing the coast. They receive this news with terror.

Aegyptus' Herald enters with attendants who pull the girls from the altar to drag them to the ships. King Pelasgus enters and stops the struggle; the Herald withdraws reluctantly, threatening war between Argos and Egypt. The Chorus praise the gods for saving them, but the play ends on a note of foreboding: war appears to be inevitable.

COMMENT: In the subsequent plays, Danaus is forced to consent to his daughters' marriage, but tells them to kill their husbands on the wedding night. All but one, Hypermnestra, who loves her husband, obey. In the last play she is brought to trial for disobeying her father, but is successfully defended by Aphrodite, goddess of love. Since these plays have not survived, it is not known what meaning Aeschylus would have given to the action outlined above. Certain themes, however, would, almost inevitably, have seemed relevant.

One theme in the Suppliants is that of sanctuary. Should King Pelasgus honor the maidens' claim of sanctuary and risk a war, or refuse, and risk having the altars polluted by their suicide? This is related to another possible theme of the tetralogy: the establishment of the line of Danaus, who, according to mythology, eventually becomes king of Argos. This theme would give the plays a patriotic significance similar to that of Aeschylus' Eumenides.

Another likely theme is the conflict between chastity and love, traditionally represented by the conflict between the goddesses Artemis and Aphrodite. Related to this is the theme of exogamy versus endogamy: whether or not marriage should be premitted outside the family or national group. (This is the theme of the Old Testament Book of Ruth.)

In the history of the theater, the Suppliants is important as the earliest surviving play. About half of it consists of choral lyrics, and it is assumed that older plays were nearly all choral. As dramatic form developed, individual characters received ever more of the writer's attention, and the interest of the audience shifted to their personalities and actions. Early drama had been largely lyric and religious in nature.

Other characteristics of older drama are also evident in the Suppliants: limitation of the number of actors on stage at one time to two; poor motivations for exits and entrances; little action; excessive geographical and genealogical detail; high grandeur of language; use of such spectacles as the gaudy foreign costumes of the maidens, a large Chorus, and the chariot drawn by horses on which Pelasgus enters.

It is after reading such a relatively primitive play as this that the reader gains some sense of the rapid and complex development of the Greek theater in the direction of the modern theater in Aeschylus' own time.

The play is named for the Chorus as being its most important element — in a way, its protagonist. Later plays were named for the single figures who became the protagonists. Some of these continued to be named for the Chorus when there was more than one major role.

PERSIANS
[472 B.C.]

BACKGROUND: The Persians was written to glorify the Greek victory over the Persians at the naval battle of Salamis in 480 B. C. (in which Aeschylus had fought). Of the four plays by Aeschylus which won first prizes in the dramatic competitions (see General Introduction), this is the only one to survive. It is also the only extant Greek play with a historical subject.

The Persians were led by their king, Xerxes, to attack Greece (480 B.C.) in revenge for the defeat of Xerxes' father, Darius, in the battle of Marathon, ten years earlier.

CHARACTERS: ATOSSA, widow of Darius and mother of KING XERXES. GHOST OF DARIUS. MESSENGER. CHORUS of Persian Elders, members of the Persian Council of State.

SETTING: In front of the Council Hall of the Persian court in Susa. Nearby is the tomb of King Darius. The Persians are awaiting news from the army of Xerxes.

The members of the Chorus open the play by singing of the Persian forces, led by King Xerxes, which have gone to invade Greece. The heroes with him are listed. In the king's absence, the members of the Council are to rule. Because they have had no news, they feel a foreboding sense of misfortune, but they sing exultantly of an entirely imaginary triumphant advance of their army to victory. In Susa, they say, the women are praying for the safe return of the men they love.

Queen Atossa enters and the Chorus bow to the ground in reverence. The absence of the king has destroyed Atossa's sense of security, and she has come to confide her thoughts to the Chorus and to ask advice. Her bad dreams and an omen have led her to anticipate misfortune. She is afraid Xerxes will not be able to hold his throne should he lose the battle; the Chorus advise her to pray and to call upon her dead husband, Darius, for help. Questioning the Chorus, she learns the Greeks have great wealth, skill in arms, and a reputation for winning battles even though they have no king.

A Messenger arrives and reports a complete defeat for the Persian navy by the numerically inferior Greeks at Salamis. The ships not sunk have been scattered, the land troops dispersed. The few left alive are struggling home.

COMMENT: The Messenger's description of the Persian defeat is one of the finest descriptive passages in Greek tragedy.

In a lamentation addressed to Zeus, the Chorus describe the misery the news brings to the civilians in Susa.

Queen Atossa brings offerings to the tomb of Darius, and the Chorus pray that Darius may rise up from the dead to help them.

The Ghost of Darius appears and learns from Atossa that Xerxes had been rashly advised by youthful counselors to stop wasting his time in sports and to emulate the military triumphs of his ancestors. Darius then reviews the history of Persia, and concludes that no leader had ever brought such misfortune as Xerxes, whose sins were great: he ignored his father's advice, he defied the gods by trying to bridge the Hellespont, he committed sacrilege by destroying the Greek temples in his war. This insolence from a mere mortal, Darius says, awakened the vengeance of Zeus, who used the Greeks to punish Xerxes. After telling Atossa to fetch rich robes for her son, who will return in rags, the Ghost of Darius retires to the tomb.

COMMENT: The character of the historical Darius has been greatly idealized by Aeschylus to make an effective contrast with Xerxes.

The Chorus praise Darius and sing joyfully of the happy days when he was king, and the army victorious.

King Xerxes arrives wearing tattered clothes, and describes the fate of individual warriors. In a lyric exchange with the Chorus, they sing at length of the woe which has come to the Persians.

COMMENT: Although primarily written to celebrate a Greek triumph, the play maintains a tragic atmosphere by representing the Persian, rather than the Greek, experience. One of the basic premises of Greek morality, that excessive wealth (koros) or wanton insolence (hubris) angers the gods and brings destruction (ate), is here shown in application to the Persians and to explain their defeat.

The disaster to the Persians rather than the advantage to Athens is emphasized. No Greek hero is even named.

As in the Suppliants, the Chorus is protagonist. There is no single character who matters more than the others.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES
[467 B.C.]

BACKGROUND: The Seven Against Thebes is the third play of a tetralogy which included the Laius, the Oedipus, and the Sphinx, a satyr-play (see General Introduction). The first two plays told the story of Laius' family, second most popular as source material for Greek tragedy after the story of Atreus' family. The stories of Laius are referred to as the Theban cycle of legends; those of Atreus as the Trojan cycle.

Laius, King of Thebes, was told by the Delphic oracle that he ought to die childless, for his son would kill him. He put his wife, Jocasta, from him without explanation. This so infuriated her that she got him drunk and lured him into her arms again. When a child was born, Laius contrived to have him die by exposure, his feet pierced by thongs and bound; but he was found by a shepherd and named Oedipus (he of the swollen feet). Raised as a son by the king of Corinth, Oedipus was told by an oracle that he would murder his father and marry his mother. Believing his foster parents to be his natural parents, Oedipus fled from their town. On the road he encountered his real father, and, being insulted by the charioteer, killed him and his master. When he got to Thebes, Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, thus saving the city. He married the queen, Jocasta, who was his natural mother. They had twins sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. When Jocasta found out the true indentity of Oedipus, she hanged herself; Opedipus put out his own eyes and went into exile. The twin sons were to have ruled Thebes jointly, but Eteocles banished Polyneices, who later joined the forces of Argos in an attack on Thebes. The Seven Against Thebes begins just before the attack on the city. (See also Euripides' Phoenissae, below.)

CHARACTERS: ETEOCLES, King of Thebes, son of Oedipus. A SPY. ANTIGONE and ISMENE, sisters of Eteocles. A HERALD. CHORUS of the women of Thebes.

SETTING: Within the city of Thebes just before an attack by the forces from Argos.

The play opens with King Eteocles exhorting the people to defend their city valiantly. A Spy then says that seven Argive heroes will each attack one of Thebes' seven gates with his men. The Chorus of women give voice to panic-stricken terror and pray for victory. In an exchange with the Chrous, which vividly reflects the emotional tensions in a beseiged city, Eteocles charges them to be silent lest their panic spread throughout the city and demoralize the army.

The Spy returns to name and describe the Argive hero at the first gate. Eteocles then names and describes a Theban hero to defend that gate. The hero named departs from the stage and the Chorus briefly sing. This formal arrangement is continued until all seven gates are manned. The climax of the sequence occurs near the end: the Spy says that the sixth Argive hero, the seer Amphiaraus, had warned Polyneices he would sin if he attacked his native city. A comparable warning is given Eteocles by the Chorus when he announces he will defend the gate his brother is attacking. Eteocles recalls their father's curse, which foresaw that they would divide their inheritance by the sword; he thereupon goes to the battle. The Chorus recall the oracle's warning that Laius ought to die childless, and lament the unhappiness which has pursued the family of Laius. They attribute the unhappiness to Laius' weakness in allowing his wife to seduce him into disobedience of the oracle.

The Spy returns, announcing victory for Thebes and the deaths of the two brothers, who have slain one another. Their bodies are carried in, and Antigone and Ismene join the Chorus in a dirge.

A Herald proclaims that the elders of the city have ruled that Eteocles receive an honorable burial, but that Polyneices' body be thrown to the dogs. Antigone resolves to defy the ruling and bury her brother. The play ends with the Chorus divided in opinion about the burial of Polyneices.

COMMENT: In the Seven Against Thebes, as in his later play, the Orestes trilogy, Aeschylus uses the theme of the fathers' sins being visited on the children. No consideration is given to the moral plight of the two brothers in this play. Thus, we can assume that Aeschylus intended the moral problem of the play to center on the sin of attacking one's native city. This perhaps reflects the then-current political situation. Just before the play was produced, Themistocles, hero of the battle of Salamis, had been forced into exile. He later joined the Persian enemy.

PROMETHEUS BOUND

[Date Unknown]

BACKGROUND: Greek mythology, like other mythologies, explains the origins of gods, man, the physical universe, and the customs of mankind in a series of stories which are rarely complete or consistent. The Greek dramatists based their plots on myths handed down through successive generations, and because the myths were inconsistent, the dramatists felt free to choose versions appropriate to their dramatic purposes. Aeschylus, in

Prometheus Bound, represents the personality of Zeus as he imagined it to have been when Zeus first seized power. In other plays, Aeschylus attributes a completely different personality to Zeus.

According to the Greek myths, the first god was Uranus, who had a group of sons called the Titans. These sons, led by Cronos, overthrew their father and established Cronos as their king. Eventually one of Cronos' sons, Zeus, planned a revolt against Cronos. One of the Titans, Prometheus, had been told by his mother that the Titans could not win by brute force alone; they must use guile. Cronos refused to listen to this advice, and Prometheus decided to join Zeus and his group, known as the Olympians, who defeated the Titans. After being made King, Zeus decided to destroy mankind, of whose mortality the gods were contemptuous, and create a new race. Prometheus, being "philanthropic," opposed this plan, and Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock.

CHARACTERS

FORCE, POWER Servants of Zeus whose names summarize their characteristics. Power speaks, but Force does not.

HEPHAESTUS Son of Zeus; god of fire and of the forge. He was the metalworker of the gods and is also regarded as the god of handicrafts.

PROMETHEUS A Titan who sided with the Olympians in revolt against the other Titans.

OCEANUS A Titan who was god of the sea before Poseidon.

IO A human Zeus fell in love with and who was changed into a heifer when Zeus' wife, Hera, became jealous.

HERMES A god who was messenger of the other gods.

CHORUS The daughters of Oceanus.

SETTING

A desolate part of the Caucasus Mountains in Scythia, the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the southwestern part of what is now Russia.

PROLOGUE: Power says that he has come with Force and Hephaestus to this desolate part of Scythia to chain Prometheus to a rock, this being Prometheus' punishment for stealing fire and giving it to human beings.

COMMENT: The significance of the setting to Aeschylus' audience was that it represented the end of the known earth. The Caucasus Mountains, running between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea were a rugged, isolated, and relatively unknown area. The isolated setting reinforces one part of Prometheus' punishment: his isolation from both gods and men.

Force and Power are absolute servants of Zeus. Characters like these, given names of abstract ideas, are called personified abstractions, and their actions are consistent with their names. They are, therefore, less complicated than characters given more realistic personalities.

Hephaestus is reluctant to punish another god, but he is too afraid of Zeus to disobey. He has an imaginative mind and vividly describes the pain Prometheus will suffer while chained to the rock and exposed to the burning sun and violent mountain storms.

COMMENT: Hephaestus is present because he is god of the forge; one of his duties is making chains and hammering them into place. Being god of fire also, Hephaestus should resent Prometheus' theft, Power says. But Hephaestus' feelings surprisingly reflect only the conflict within him between the obligations of kinship and friendship on one hand, and the fear of Zeus on the other.

One of the important issues in the play is introduced in this scene: should an individual submit to authority, or should he obey his own code of conduct? The consequences of each choice are discussed as the play progresses.

Power believes it to be futile for Hephaestus to worry about what is inevitable and tells him to get on with his business. Hephaestus wields his hammer, and Power urges him to hit harder and make the bonds tighter. The climax of the violence occurs when a wedge is driven through Prometheus' chest.

COMMENT: Being a god, Prometheus cannot die; this makes it possible for much greater torture to be inflicted on him than on a human being. All the characters in the play are supernatural beings (except Io), but their plausibility and their appeal to the audience lie largely in their humanlike motives, emotions, and ways of behaving.

Hephaestus leaves, and Power taunts Prometheus, insolently asking how the humans he helped can help him now. Prometheus, alone, asks the natural forces around him to behold what he, a god himself, has to suffer at the hands of other gods. Able to foresee the future, he knows how great his suffering will be. He points out that his only sin was helping mankind.

PARODOS: In a winged chariot, the Chorus of Oceanids enter; they have come from their cave in the sea to profess friendship and sympathy. A group of charming young girls, they tell Prometheus they came as soon as they could get their father's permission—they didn't even have time to put their sandals on. They are shocked because Zeus has rejected the great laws of the past and made up his own laws.

COMMENT: It is characteristic in Greek plays for the Chorus to give lyrical expression of emotions arising from the action. The Chorus' viewpoint of the action is usually from a position midway between the extremes of the major characters. This viewpoint is frequently one that the author, and, by implication, the audience prefer. The Oceanids are definitely sympathetic to Prometheus. They assure him that all the gods but Zeus are equally sympathetic; this is more enthusiastic than accurate, however.

Prometheus wishes his punishment had condemned him to Tartarus (usually thought of as being even lower than Hades), where he would be hidden from anyone who could gloat over his pain. The Chorus say Zeus will be a tyrant until he either satisfies his desire for cruelty or is overthrown. Prometheus hints that Zeus will indeed be overthrown; he knows what action of Zeus will cause his overthrow, but Zeus can learn this secret only by freeing Prometheus.

COMMENT: Prometheus' secret is that if Zeus consummates his passion for Thetis, she will bear him a son who will overthrow him. Hints of this secret appear throughout the play and give some suspense to the lack of action.

FIRST EPISODE: Prometheus satisfies the Chorus' curiosity by telling them the story of the events leading to his punishment: a group of gods revolted to drive Cronos, king of the Titans, from his throne and establish Zeus in his place as king of the Olympians. Prometheus sided at first with the Titans and proposed a crafty scheme for victory. They despised craft, believing they could win by force. Prometheus then offered to help Zeus, who won. Once king, Zeus gave various powers and privileges to those who had aided him, and decided to destroy human beings and create a new race. Only Prometheus defied Zeus in this latter plan, and his defiance angered Zeus and caused his punishment. The Chorus ask whether he did anything else to anger Zeus. He replies that he gave two gifts to man: blind hope, so man could forget the inevitability of his own death, and fire.

COMMENT: As we learn more about Prometheus, it becomes clear that he symbolizes knowledge (his name means "forethought"); his opponents, Zeus and Cronos, symbolizes force. The secret Prometheus knows about the fate of Zeus becomes a symbol of the ultimate trimph of knowledge over force.

On another level, Prometheus symbolizes disinterested action directed toward helping others. It is on this level that Prometheus is frequently compared to Christ. Fire is Prometheus' most famous gift to man, and it is symbol of practical knowledge. In Athens the worship of Prometheus was closely associated with the worship of Hephaestus. This may explain Hephaestus' sympathy in the prologue.

Oceanus enters, carried on a winged sea-monster. Preoccupied with himself, he first talks about his long trip. Prometheus wonders how he ever found courage to leave his safe home in the ocean. Oceanus offers the kind of advice one might expect from a timid person interested mainly in self-preservation. He wants Prometheus to be humble and to conform to the new ways, to stop speaking angry and defiant words to Zeus, and to plan a way to get released from the rock. Oceanus offers to intercede with Zeus to get Prometheus freed, but Prometheus warns him that this will only make Zeus angry with him too.

COMMENT: Oceanus is a comic figure, absurdly inadequate to the role of mediator between two such mighty opposites. Timid, cowardly, and good-natured, he serves tyranny differently, but just as usefully, as do Force, Power, and, later, Hermes.

One dramatic device Aeschylus uses to sharpen the audience's sense of one character's qualities is to present another character with the opposite qualities. Oceanus' timidity and self-interest sharply contrast with Prometheus' boldness and self-sacrifice. A similar contrast exists in the prologue between Power and Hephaestus.

FIRST STASIMON: The Chorus lament the sufferings of Prometheus and compare them to the sufferings of another Titan, Atlas, who bears on his back the pillar supporting the skies.

SECOND EPISODE: Prometheus tells the Chorus what gifts he has bestowed on mankind: the use of the mind and the arts of building, of telling the seasons of the year apart, of using numbers and the alphabet, of history, of domesticating wild animals, of building ships, of medicine, of foretelling the future, and of using metals.

> **COMMENT:** Many mythologies describing the early conditions of man show early man as a kind of noble savage who later falls into corruption and decline. Aeschylus describes primitive man here as an unenlightened brute sorely in need of Prometheus' gifts to raise him above the condition of an animal.

The Chorus tell Prometheus he has gone beyond all limits of expediency in helping mankind; he has neglected himself.

> **COMMENT:** The Chorus, insofar as they represent a norm of conduct, are here warning Prometheus against the sin of <u>hubris</u>, lack of moderation.

Prometheus, in a dialogue with the Chorus, explains the idea of Necessity, or Destiny, a higher law than any Zeus can establish. Referring again to his secret, Prometheus implies that the rule of Zeus will not last forever.

SECOND STASIMON: The Chorus say they hope Zeus will never be angry with any of them. Prometheus' love of mankind, they say again, showed no moderation. Why, they wonder, did he ever bother to help such weak beings, creatures who live such a short life? Like many laments, this one ends by a recall of happier days: the Oceanids recall the bridal song they sang when Prometheus wed their sister, Hesione.

THIRD EPISODE: Io, transformed in part to a heifer, and pursued by the ghost of Argus in the form of a stinging insect, the gladfly, runs on to the stage. The insect has her in a state of distraction: she asks where she is, why she has suffered so much, and what man is tied to the rock. She piteously begs to be swallowed up by the earth. Prometheus answers some of her questions, and she then wants to know what is in store for her in the future. He is about to tell her when the Chorus, their curiosity aroused, ask her to tell the story of her past.

Io's adventures began when she was a young girl living in her father's house. She had visions in which voices said that Zeus had fallen in love with her and that she should go into the fields alone and meet him. She reported these visions to her father, who consulted the oracle and was told to drive her away from home. After Io was driven out, Hera, Zeus' wife, jealous of Io as a rival for Zeus' love, caused her to grow horns, and sent the gladfly to drive her from place to place.

With interruptions and questions from Io and the Chorus, Prometheus tells Io's future. Among other events, she will cross the Bosphorus, thus giving it its name, which means "the crossing of the heifer." Near the mouth of the Nile, Zeus will finally grant her peace and restore her natural shape. After this meeting with him, she will bear a child, and from the line of this child, thirteen generations later, will be born Hercules, who will free Prometheus. To show that his prediction of the future will come true, Prometheus tells of events from her past that Io had not revealed. The gadfly begins biting her again, and she flees.

COMMENT: By far the longest of the episodes in the play, this scene sometimes reads like a lesson in Greek geography, but it is directly related to the theme of tyranny. Io is the most pathetic victim of Zeus because she had done nothing at all. Prometheus openly defied Zeus, but Io is simply victimized. Further, she has no strength to fight back; she has not even the comfort Prometheus derives from his secret. This scene makes Zeus appear to be an absolutely malicious tyrant, and makes the idea of tyranny in human government appear to be monstrous. The audience is receiving, by example, a lesson in politics.

THIRD STASIMON: The Chorus react to Io's story by praying that a god will never fall in love with any of them; they prefer marriages between equals. They admit, however, that if Zeus were to fall in love with them, they would be powerless to resist him.

COMMENT: This song of the Chorus dramatizes the difficulty of maintaining the middle way or "golden mean." Having said in the beginning of this stasimon that marriage between persons from different social classes is undesirable, the Chorus are constrained to admit later that when force enters the situation, as it does with Zeus, the weaker person is helpless. Thus wisdom, if defined as being some compromise between extremes, cannot be easily or automatically attained.

EXODOS: Prometheus tells the Chorus that Cronos, when he was overthrown, cursed Zeus. Prometheus foretells that Zeus will be hurled from his throne unless he discovers the secret. The Chorus say this is wishful thinking.

COMMENT: The other two plays of this trilogy, Prometheus Unbound and Prometheus the Fire-Bringer, have not survived, and we do not know what ideas Aeschylus would have associated with the final release of Prometheus. It seems likely, however, on the basis of outside evidence, that some compromise would have been effected between him and Zeus. In other accounts of the myth, Zeus is not overthrown, and he probably learns that a successful ruler must acquire the virtues of justice and benevolence.

Hermes enters with a message: Zeus demands to know the secret of his downfall. Prometheus, who despises Hermes, calls him a slave and says that Zeus must release him before he'll reveal the secret. Zeus has anticipated this defiance, and Hermes says that a violent storm will smash the mountains and bury Prometheus. Centuries later he will emerge to the surface of the earth, and an eagle will daily tear out his liver and eat it. This torture will continue until some god willingly gives up his immortality and goes to Tartarus as a substitute for Prometheus.

COMMENT: Hermes' threat contains the last of three references made in the play to the way Prometheus is finally freed. The first reference is to the secret Prometheus mentions several times regarding a woman who will bear a child by Zeus who will threaten the overthrow of his father. This story of the secret is associated with Prometheus probably for the first time by Aeschylus. The usual version is that Hercules will ultimately free Prometheus by killing the eagle eating his liver: this version is referred to by Prometheus in the third episode of the play. Hermes' threat seems to set an impossible condition: that a god be willing to surrender his immortality and go to Tartarus. However, Chiron, a Centaur (a mythological creature:

half man, half horse), was incurably wounded by Hercules' arrow and desired to surrender his immortality rather than suffer forever.

Prometheus says that Zeus can do his worst; while he may have to suffer, he cannot be destroyed. Hermes calls him delirious and warns the Chorus to leave before the storm arrives. They reply that they will suffer with Prometheus rather than join traitors. Telling the Chorus that whatever may happen to them is their own fault, Hermes leaves. Prometheus describes the beginning of the violent storm. He concludes the play with a simple and powerful request that Earth and Air behold what wrongs he suffers.

FURTHER COMMENTS

Prometheus Bound has often been called a static play because the hero is chained to a rock and nothing happens on stage. However, the play both begins and ends with scenes of great violence. Further, the characters who visit Prometheus show great variety: the strength of Power, the fluttering girls of the chorus, the fussy Oceanus, and the distracted Io create vivid contrasts. The sharpest conflict is between the obstinacy of Prometheus and the tyranny of Zeus, which is understood as a conflict of ideas. The moral issue is the question of obedience to authority, but this immediately raises the further question of what right authority can claim to justify absolute obedience. Prometheus chooses to defy authority and suffer the consequences. Oceanus recommends compliance to gain comfort. Even the sympathetic Oceanids, who are willing to be crushed with Prometheus in the final debacle, tell him earlier in the play that he is too obstinate. From surviving fragments of Prometheus Unbound, it seems that Aeschylus shows Prometheus and Zeus both relenting and cooperating to establish a middle way of justice and order. Certainly in the later Oresteia, Aeschylus represents Zeus as a just god.

ORESTEIA
[458 B.C.]

BACKGROUND: The Oresteia comprises three plays: the Agamemnon, the Choephori, and the Eumenides. The name "Oresteia" derives from "Orestes," the name of Agamemnon's son, who is the chief character of the second and third plays. Although the action of each play forms a separate dramatic unit, the full significance of the trilogy (see General Introduction) is not apparent until the end. The Oresteia is the only complete trilogy of Greek plays that has come down to us.

AGAMEMNON

BACKGROUND: Atreus, King of Argos, had a long-standing quarrel with his younger brother, Thyestes, who had seduced Atreus' wife, Aerope. Thyestes went into exile, but Atreus lured him back with a promise of forgiveness. At a welcoming banquest, Atreus sought revenge by serving the bodies of Thyestes' two sons to him in a stew. After Thyestes had eaten, the boys' heads were brought in on a platter to show Thyestes' what he had just done. Before going into exile again, he laid a curse on the entire house of Atreus.

Before marrying Atreus, Aerope had been married to Plisthenes, Atreus' son. By him she had become the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus, who were raised by Atreus and were generally considered to be his children. (The two are frequently referred to as the "Atridae": sons of Atreus.) Agamemnon and Menelaus married sisters: Clytemnestra and Helen. Helen, reputed to be the most beautiful woman in the world, was seduced by Paris and carried off to Troy. To get her back, Agamemnon rallied the Greek princes to attack

Troy. The war which followed lasted ten years. The Agamemnon opens just before the return of Agamemnon to his home.

CHARACTERS

WATCHMAN Given no name, he appears only in the prologue.

CLYTEMNESTRA The wife of King Agamemnon.

HERALD A messenger who brings a first-hand account of events immediately succeeding the Trojan War.

AGAMEMNON King of Argos and chief leader of the Greek forces that fought in the Trojan War.

CASSANDRA Daughter of Priam, king of Troy. When the spoils were divided after the Trojan War, she was given to Agamemnon.

AEGISTHUS Son of Thyestes by his own daughter, Pelopia. During Agamemnon's absence, he became the lover of Clytemnestra.

CHORUS Composed of elderly citizens of Argos.

SETTING

In front of the palace of King Agamemnon in Argos (a kingdom in the north-eastern part of the Greek Peloponnesus).

PROLOGUE: A Watchman, alone on the roof of Agamemnon's palace, tells how tired he is of watching for a beacon light which will signify the end of the Trojan War and the imminent return of Agamemnon. Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, who has ruled in his absence, has the strong character of a man, but the Watchman does not praise her. He is frightened and unhappy: some dishonor has recently come upon the house. When the Watchman sees the beacon, he has a moment's joyful anticipation of Agamemnon's return; then he becomes gloomy again and says that though the walls might speak if they had a voice, he intends to be quiet about what has been happening. He goes out to tell Clytemnestra that the beacon has been lighted; the ten years of waiting are over.

> **COMMENT:** The audience, of course, knows what dishonor the Watchman is referring to: Aegisthus has become Clytemnestra's lover. In addition, the audience knows that Aegisthus, as Thyestes' son, is seeking revenge upon Agamemnon, son of Atreus, and that the king will be murdered when he returns. This knowledge gives a double meaning to almost everything said by the characters, who do not know what is going to happen (see "dramatic irony" in General Introduction). In the prologue, for example, the audience knows that misfortune will befall Agamemnon and that the hopes for happiness expressed by the Watchman will be disappointed.

PARODOS: The Chorus say that ten years have passed since Agamemnon and Menelaus left to attack Troy. They won the war because Paris had taken Helen while a guest in Menelaus' house. This sin against the laws of hospitality angered Zeus, who helped the Greeks to win. Describing themselves, the members of the Chorus say that they were too old to fight in the war.

COMMENT: The age of the Chorus members helps to qualify them as dispassionate commentators on the actions of the younger, more hot-blooded central characters. The Chorus attribute the outcome of the Trojan War to Zeus' justice, not to superior strength or skill of the Argive forces. Their reflections on the causes for human actions and misfortunes modulate the audience's perception of the central characters' actions. No action, the Chorus imply, is single in itself, and they constantly refer to the past, which is still working itself out in the present; to the future, which reveals the results of deeds done in the present; and to the gods, who watch and judge. Their feeling that man is a being trapped and confined by the uncontrollable and unknowable is characteristic of much tragedy.

FIRST STASIMON: Clytemnestra enters and the Chorus ask her why she has ordered so many sacrifices made on the altars. Before she answers, the Chorus tell of an omen observed before the departure of Agamemnon: a pair of eagles had attacked and torn open a rabbit. The prophet Calchas had said that the eagles represented Agamemnon and Menelaus; the rabbit, Troy. Calchas had warned, however, that Artemis (goddess of the hunt) was angry with Zeus for sending the eagles to kill the rabbit, and might exact vengeance by demanding a sacrifice from Agamemnon. In a meditative interlude, the Chorus contemplate the violence and subsequent pain for mankind which seem to accompany Zeus' intervention in human affairs; Zeus, they say, has ordained that wisdom can come to man only through suffering.

Resuming their story, the Chorus tell how, when adverse winds kept the Greek fleet at Aulis on its way to Troy, Calchas explained to the leaders that Artemis was offended and would not grant favorable winds until Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, should be made a human sacrifice on Artemis' altar. Torn between loyalty to his companions and love for his daughter, Agamemnon decided to sacrifice her. The Chorus say they disapprove of Agamemnon's choice; they condemn the soldier's lust for a war fought for a false woman. They movingly describe the pitiful scene of the sacrifice, the gag placed on Iphigenia's mouth so she could not speak a curse, and the beseeching look in her eyes.

COMMENT: The choice Agamemnon had to make was between conflicting loyalties, and either alternative would have brought him misfortune. On one level of reading, Agamemnon is an individual suffering the consequences of the old curse on his family, a curse "inherited" by his son later in the trilogy. On another level, Agamemnon is a symbol of all mankind, and Aeschylus' tragic view of life suggests that man's choices in life are limited to evil alternatives, and that suffering is the necessary consequence of all actions. It should be noted, however, that Agamemnon is not simply a passive victim of a family curse. The Chorus say he fought an unjust war; the sacrifice was therefore unjust too. In this way, the matter focuses on Agamemnon's character: he was a soldier whose loyalty to his army transcended his loyalty to his family.

FIRST EPISODE: The Chorus again ask Clytemnestra to reveal the reason for the sacrifices. She tells them the Greeks have defeated the Trojans and explains the way beacon fires passed the news from one hilltop to another. She vividly describes the unhappiness of the Trojans as she imagines it to have been when the Greeks moved into Troy to loot and to divide the spoils of war. She ends on a warning note, expressing a hope that the Greeks not anger the gods by destroying any of the gods' temples there.

SECOND STASIMON: The Chorus address Zeus and attribute the Greek victory to his desire to punish the Trojans. They say great daring will always be punished: the sin of Paris brought the destruction of Troy; the dowry of Helen was death. When she left the house of Menelaus, the prophets foresaw calamity, and the horrors of war fulfilled their prophecies. The Greeks suffered too; their young men return home as ashes in urns. The populace hated this war fought for a woman and believe that the house of Atreus will be punished for excessive wealth, excessive daring, and for causing so many deaths.

COMMENT: The Chorus here express one of the most important viewpoints developed by Greek civilization: that excess of any kind is sin. Called variously "the middle way" and "the golden mean," this viewpoint condemned the sins of excess under the name of hubris. Through these statements of the Chorus, and before Agamemnon ever appears on the stage, the audience sees evidence gradually accumulating for a case against the triumphant hero of the Trojan War. Although the attitude toward Agamemnon in the Iliad centuries earlier was not one of unqualified hero-worship, it is worth noting the explicit criticism of both war and heroic action in the Oresteia. The different attitudes demonstrate the transformation of values which occurs as a civilization develops.

SECOND EPISODE: The Chorus begin to doubt the truth of the beacon's signal. Perhaps, they say, Clytemnestra was carried away by her feminine desire to believe what she wants to hear. Confirmation of the beacon's message comes with a Herald who enters with a first-hand account of the war's end. More than a mere reporter of news, the Herald first expresses his personal happiness at being home again. He praises Agamemnon and casually mentions the destruction of the temples in Troy. His account of the war is not a tale of heroism, but a tale of discomfort, pain, and death. The Chorus say they have longed for the soldiers to return home because there are troubles at home only they can solve. Clytemnestra then taunts the Chorus for having doubted the message of the beacon. Pride and strength are evident in her disdain for men who doubted her woman's belief. Playing the role of a faithful wife, she makes elaborate plans for Agamemnon's reception and sends him a message praising her own faithfulness. Answering the questions of the Chorus, the Herald tells of a violent storm that separated the returning ships and says that the fate of Menelaus is unknown.

COMMENT: With his report of the temples' destruction the Herald inadvertently brings more evidence against Agamemnon. But the stature of Agamemnon at the same time appears to increase; he becomes the more a great man for having sinned much. The brief and defiant appearance of Clytemnestra, who lies in the face of the Chorus, likewise increases her stature and helps to make of her an opponent worthy of Agamemnon.

THIRD STASIMON: The Chorus say that the name of Helen means death; it is an appropriate name for one who caused the death of ships, of cities, and of men. They compare Paris' taking the beautiful Helen home to Troy to the man who raised a lion cub which after it grew up destroyed him. There is a saying, the Chorus say, that wealth causes suffering; but they state the only cause of suffering to be committing evil acts. Excessive pride and daring (hubris) lead to disaster; it is to just men with simple hearts that the blessing of happiness comes—the strength of gold and the false face of flattery will not give it.

COMMENT: The Chorus do not appear entirely consistent here: while they say wealth does not necessarily make men evil, they also say that justice shuns wealth.

THIRD EPISODE: Agamemnon enters in a chariot, with Cassandra beside him. The Chorus try to find a greeting neither excessive nor inadequate. They frankly tell him they opposed the Trojan War, but they are also happy he has come home. They say he will quickly find out who has governed well, and who badly, during his absence. Agamemnon says he must first visit the temples and thank the gods for his victory. Then he will assemble the citizens and, with them, judge any who have done evil.

COMMENT: At this point, Agamemnon's sentiments are unexceptionable; but such piety, humility, and love of justice do not long remain the forces controlling his actions.

Clytemnestra vividly describes the sufferings a faithful wife undergoes when she must live with daily rumors of her husband's death, sufferings which, she says, had driven her to attempt suicide many times. These same rumors have, she also says, led her to send their son, Orestes, away, lest the people rebel and kill him. She orders her servants to spread rich tapestries on the ground that Agamemnon's feet may not have to touch the earth, but he forbids this—such pomp, he says, should be reserved for the gods. Clytemnestra then masks her formidable strength somewhat with femininity and wheedles him into walking on the tapestries just to please her.

COMMENT: One of the notable features of this play is that this is the only scene in which the protagonist appears on the stage. Yet Agamemnon is undoubtedly the central figure of the play, and the interest of the audience remains centered on his fate. The reasonableness he shows when present stands out in ironic contrast to his actions reported from the past. However, he does walk on the tapestries, and this critical action focuses attention again on his hubris.

The stature of Agamemnon is heroic, and his character is one the audience can sympathize with. It is when the audience feels sympathy and admiration for Agamemnon, and at the same time realizes that the sins he committed were for him unavoidable and will be punished, that it receives the impact of those emotions appropriate to tragedy.

Agamemnon removes his sandals before walking on the tapestries, hoping no god will be offended; Clytemnestra proudly says that she would have trampled on many such tapestries if it had been necessary to bring her husband home alive. Before going into the house with Clytemnestra, Agamemnon requests that Cassandra be treated kindly.

COMMENT: This scene is a superb example of dramatic irony. The audience, familiar with the outcome of the action, keenly appreciates the futility of Agamemnon's humble statements and the arrogance of Clytemnestra's lies.

FOURTH STASIMON: The Chorus, happy that Agamemnon has returned, yet are fearful of misfortune.

FOURTH EPISODE: Clytemnestra comes out of the house and politely asks Cassandra to enter, but receives no answer and angrily goes inside again. Cassandra, in a prophetic frenzy, calls upon Apollo, saying that now he has destroyed her utterly. She recalls the old curse on the house of the Atridae, and how the children were killed and served up to their father; then she prophesies that Clytemnestra will murder Agamemnon. The Chorus say they want no prophets in their city; divination brings no good to men. Asked about the origin of her prophetic gift, she says it was given her by Apollo, who had fallen in love with her. When she rebuffed his advances, he decreed that no one should ever

believe her prophecies. Thus, when she prophesies the murder of Agamemnon, the Chorus refuse to understand her; she tears off the flowers she has been wearing and casts away her prophetic staff. Knowing that she will be killed too, she offers as a hope for the future that someone will come to avenge her by slaying his mother. (Her words anticipate the return of Orestes in the second play of this trilogy.) As she enters the house, Agamemnon's voice is heard from within, crying out that he has been stabbed. The Chorus run about in distraction, suggesting various courses of action.

EXODOS: The palace doors open, revealing the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytemnestra, standing in triumph, says she lied to spring her trap, but now can speak the truth. She exultantly describes the net she had hung to fall on Agamemnon and the three blows she struck to kill him; for a long time she had desired to feel his blood spatter her. The Chorus say she will be banished from the city for murder. She points out that Agamemnon was not banished for killing Iphigenia, and enumerates her reasons for considering the murder of her husband justified: it was a sacrifice to Artemis, against whom Agamemnon had sinned; it was her revenge upon him for bringing Cassandra to her house; it was a fulfillment of the curse on the house of Atreus.

Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover, comes out of the palace. He, too, desired Agamemnon's death: it had been Agamemnon's father, Atreus, who had killed the two sons of his own father, Thyestes. The Chorus, however, merely despise Aegisthus for having relied on Clytemnestra to effect his revenge. Aegisthus threatens them, but Clytemnestra speaks, calmly and authoritatively, saying that the two of them will be strong enough to control the townspeople and that there is no reason to quarrel now.

COMMENT: In this concluding scene the pride, defiance, and self-confidence of Clytemnestra are effectively heightened by contrast to the short-tempered hysteria of Aegisthus. It seems apparent that by himself, Aegisthus could never have effected his revenge against Agamemnon.

CHOEPHORI
[Libation Bearers]

BACKGROUND: The events in the Choephori occur about seven years after those in the Agamemnon. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus still rule Argos; Electra, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, has been raised to young womanhood in the household; her brother, Orestes, sent away before Agamemnon returned to Argos, is about to return as the play begins.

CHARACTERS:

ORESTES Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, away from home with his friend, Pylades, since his childhood.

CHORUS Slave women brought back from Troy by Agamemnon.

ELECTRA Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, sister of Orestes.

NURSE Cared for Orestes when he was a baby.

CLYTEMNESTRA Wife of Agamemnon who, during his absence in Troy, took Aegisthus for a lover and with his aid killed Agamemnon upon his return.

AEGISTHUS Lover of Clytemnestra. Son of Thyestes and a cousin of Agamemnon.

PYLADES Friend of Orestes.

ATTENDANT

SETTING

The first part of the play is set before the tomb of Agamemnon; the second part before Agamemnon's palace.

PROLOGUE: (The opening of the prologue has not survived.) In the lines of the prologue which have survived, Orestes gives his reasons for laying two locks of his hair on the tomb of his father, Agamemnon. One lock is dedicated to Inachus, the river-god, who had watched over his childhood, and the other to his father, whose funeral he had not attended. Seeing Electra and the Chorus approach the tomb, Orestes and Pylades withdraw after Orestes has briefly prayed that Zeus may grant him the power to avenge his father's murder.

PARADOS: The Chorus reveal that Clytemnestra, because of frightening dreams, has sent them to pour a libation on Agamemnon's tomb. Of what she has dreamed the Chorus say only that "the dead are angry with the living." The offering is designed to prevent one crime (the murder of Agamemnon) from bringing about another (Clytemnestra's murder). The Chorus say nothing can atone for murder; revenge is inevitable. Trojan slave women, the Chorus lament the fall of Troy; they hate Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and say their reign is guilty of tyranny and sin.

FIRST EPISODE: Electra, who is offering the libation, asks the Chorus what words should accompany it. In her conversation with them it becomes clear that the women of the Chorus have encouraged her to revere the memory of her father and to hate the woman who killed him. Her prayer is thus for revenge against her mother and Aegisthus. Besides moral disapproval, Electra has a personal reason for hating her mother and Aegisthus: she and her brother, she says, have been kept from their rightful place in the kingdom and must live in poverty while Clytemnestra and her lover enjoy Agamemnon's wealth. Electra notices the two locks of hair and knows, from the color, and because no one else would have left them, that they are her brother's. She then sees a footprint, fits her own foot into it, and declares that Orestes has been there in person.

COMMENT: One of the features of Greek drama mentioned by Aristotle in his Poetics is the "recognition scene." In such scenes a stranger is revealed to be someone closely connected with the character who recognizes the stranger's true identity. This recognition of Orestes by tokens is the earliest surviving "recognition scene" from Greek drama. It is perhaps worth noting that the evidence Electra uses is extremely artificial and unlikely, a fact that might be explained by the scene's early date or, more plausibly, by Aeschylus' lack of interest in a particular kind of verisimilitude. A similar scene occurs at the end of the Odyssey when Odysseus' old nurse recognized him by a scar on his leg.

Orestes comes forward and identifies himself by showing Electra a robe she wove years earlier. They pray to Zeus that they, children of the eagle, Agamemnon, be kept safe. Orestes says he is seeking revenge at the express command of Apollo, who threatened banishment and death unless he was obeyed. He also advances his personal reasons for revenge: love for his father, desire to

possess his father's wealth, and outrage that Argos should be ruled by a woman and her paramour: Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

COMMENT: In the Agamemnon, Clytemnestra had no order from a god to avenge Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, but she argued that avenging Iphigenia's death was her justification. In the Choephori, this justification is hardly mentioned; emphasis is placed on her lust in taking a lover.

FIRST STASIMON: The Chorus, Orestes, and Electra chant a lamentation for Agamemnon. How honored he would have been had he died in the war! How disgraceful the private, unceremonious funeral given him by Clytemnestra! How his children have suffered! To avenge these humiliations, they swear to kill Clytemnestra.

COMMENT: While this stasimon has not advanced the action, it functions dramatically by giving intense lyrical expression to the feelings of someone who contemplates killing his mother. In a sense, it spurs him to action.

SECOND EPISODE: In a prayer to the spirit of their father, Electra and Orestes ask him to rise from his grave and assist them.

COMMENT: The ghost of Agamemnon does not appear in this play, as does that of Clytemnestra in the Eumenides, or that of Darius in the Persians.

Orestes asks why Clytemnestra, of all people, had sent the libation Electra brought in at the beginning of the play. The Chorus reply that Clytemnestra dreamed she gave birth to a serpent which she nursed, and which drew forth a blood-clot with its milk. Orestes interprets the dream by saying he is the serpent, and the blood-clot a symbol of her death. He then plans the way in which he will murder her. Electra is to enter the house without telling anyone her brother has returned. Orestes and Pylades will appear as travellers, speaking a dialect, and will kill Clytemnestra at the first opportunity. The Chorus, for their part, shall remain silent.

COMMENT: Aeschylus' technique here—having the plan revealed in advance—is different from that used in the Agamemnon, where neither Clytemnestra's plan nor her true feelings are stated before the plan is a success.

SECOND STASIMON: The Chorus say that the earth has bred such strange and frightening things as monsters, meteors, and whirlwinds, but that the worst is a woman possessed by passion. They cite the examples of Althea, Scylla, Clytemnestra, and the women on the island of Lemnos, all women who murdered their husbands. The Chorus add that all were punished by Justice, which always repays those who spill blood.

THIRD EPISODE: (The setting for the rest of the play is in front of the palace.) Orestes and Pylades knock at the palace gate and ask for a night's lodging. Clytemnestra courteously welcomes them and asks who they are. Orestes says they are travellers and that a stranger had told them, since they were going to Argos, to give the message, "Orestes is no more." Clytemnestra, responding as a mother should to strangers upon hearing such news, loudly laments the death of her son. They go into the palace with her.

Orestes' old nurse then tearfully tells the Chorus that Clytemnestra wants Aegisthus to see the strangers and hear their news. She says that Clytemnestra,

in front of the servants, concealed her joy at the news Orestes was dead. The nurse's grief is genuine, and she happily reminisces of the days she nursed Orestes. The Chorus tell her not to tell Aegisthus that Clytemnestra wants him to bring his armed bodyguard with him.

COMMENT: Orestes' difficulties would have been much greater without the assistance of the Chorus; only rarely do they play so active a role in the plot as when they suggest the nurse change her message.

THIRD STASIMON: Now that revenge is near, the hatred of the Chorus for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus reaches a frenzy. They hope that Orestes will not weaken when his mother cries for mercy, and they pray that the old family curse will then die.

FOURTH EPISODE: Aegisthus, too, feigns sympathy for the death of Orestes, but does not quite believe that it has occurred. He says that Clytemnestra's fear may have duped her, but asserts that the strangers will not be able to deceive him. He goes into the palace and a cry is heard. An attendant rushes out saying Aegisthus has been killed. Clytemnestra appears and hears the attendant say that the dead have come to slay the living; she knows immediately what he means and calls for the axe she used to kill Agamemnon. Orestes comes out of the palace carrying a blood-covered sword; his mother begs for mercy. He turns for advice to Pylades, who reminds him of Apollo's orders. Clytemnestra pleads Agamemnon's lewdness in bringing Cassandra home and vows revenge through the hounds of hell if he kills her. She pleads in vain: he drives her into the house and kills her.

FOURTH STASIMON: The Chorus celebrate the triumph of Justice, which works through Time, the great Accomplisher.

EXODOS: The central doors of the palace open, revealing the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes interprets the scene to the audience. He explains that the net they see was used by Clytemnestra to ensnare Agamemnon when she murdered him. He justifies his own murders, citing reasons given earlier to Electra (see first episode).

Struck by visions, he thinks he recognizes the hounds of hell, his mother's threatened avengers. The Chorus do not see them. When Orestes runs from the stage, to seek refuge from the spirits at the shrine of Apollo, the Chorus point out that madness is the last, inevitable stage in the progress of the house of Atreus toward its doom.

EUMENIDES
[Kindly Ones]

BACKGROUND: Orestes has fled to the temple of Apollo at Delphi to seek protection from the avenging Furies stirred up by his mother, Clytemnestra, after he murdered her. Only a few days have elapsed since the closing scene of the Choephori.

CHARACTERS

PRIESTESS In charge of the temple of Apollo.

APOLLO God of prophecy, frequently represented in his role as god of the sun.

ORESTES Son of Agamemnon, King of Argos, and of his wife, Clytemnestra.

THE GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA Seeking revenge on her son, who has murdered her.

CHORUS A band of supernatural creatures, the Furies (Erinyes), deities who bring revenge, especially for the murder of blood kindred, appear as women wearing horrible masks.

ATHENA Daughter of Zeus, born by springing from his forehead. Her chief attributes are power and wisdom. She was regarded also as the protector of the state.

ATTENDANTS OF ATHENA

TWELVE ATHENIAN CITIZENS Chosen as jurors for the trial of Orestes.

This is one of the few Greek plays in which the Chorus goes off the stage entirely and in which there is a complete change of scene. The first part of the play is set before the temple of Apollo at Delphi, the second, apparently, on the Areopagus (Ares' Hill) in Athens.

PROLOGUE: The Priestess prays to the various gods to whom her temple has been dedicated in the past. She, as priestess to the present divinity, Apollo, speaks for him; he follows the commands of Zeus. She goes into the temple and, after a short interval, comes out in great fear. She has seen Orestes crouching at the altar, bloody sword in hand. Near him are the monstrous Furies, sound asleep and snoring loudly.

FIRST EPISODE: (The temple doors open, revealing the interior. Apollo and Hermes appear.) Apollo speaks to Orestes, promising to protect him from the Furies. He says that they dwell in Tartarus (an underworld place even lower than Hades) and have long been hated as much by the gods as by mankind. He tells Orestes to go to Athens, Athena's city, where he will find justice.

The ghost of Clytemnestra appears and, in a rage, denounces the Furies for letting Orestes escape; only slowly do they awaken from their deep sleep.

PARODOS: The Furies lament the escape of Orestes and accuse Apollo of having wronged them. They say the younger gods, such as Apollo, have no respect for the ancient divinities and their laws.

COMMENT: As the play progresses, emphasis gradually shifts away from the plight of Orestes to the more general theme of conflicting systems of law; Orestes becomes only a single example of such a general conflict. The older law, represented here by the Furies, was the law of revenge (the lex talionis: "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"); the new law, represented by Apollo and Athena (and, by implication, Zeus) involves public justice determined by a jury in reference to a code of laws.

SECOND EPISODE: Apollo orders the Furies out of his temple; he says they belong some place where blood is being spilled. They defend themselves by attacking the matricide, Orestes. Apollo points out that they had not acted when Agamemnon was killed. They say they are only concerned with bloodshed of kindred and that Agamemnon was not a blood relative of his wife. In opposition to Apollo and his principles, they swear never to cease from their pursuit.

(The scene shifts to Athens, before the temple of Athena.) Orestes, clinging to the statue of Athena, states that Apollo has told him he will find justice here. The Chorus then enter, pursuing Orestes like a pack of bloodhounds. Their general repulsiveness is increased by their description of their love of eating blood. Orestes says that the bloodstain on his hands disappeared after he visited Apollo's shrine, that he brought no curse to anyone he visited, and that therefore the gods have absolved him of guilt.

FIRST STASIMON: Addressing their mother, Night, the Furies reiterate their right to pursue slayers of blood-kindred until they die; new pain is the only way to atone for ancient wrong.

THIRD EPISODE: Athena enters, having heard Orestes' prayer near Troy, where she has been claiming land given her by the victorious Greeks. She is appalled by the sight of the Furies and asks their business. After hearing their explanation, she says they are interested in the forms of justice rather than the substance. After hearing the story of Orestes, however, she says she is not able to decide the issue herself: both he and the Furies have rights she cannot abrogate with her decision alone. She announces that she will choose a panel of the truest men in Athens to listen to the case and decide upon its merits.

COMMENT: The celebration of local customs and institutions was a frequent subject of Greek tragedy. Here, the institution being celebrated is the court of the Areopagus (Ares' Hill), where citizens listened to the arguments for contending sides and decided judgments. The play represents the mythical origins of the court and establishes its authority and ethical viewpoint.

SECOND STASIMON: The Furies say that if the case is decided against them the older laws will have been overthrown and murderers will be able to kill without restraint. They maintain that the only emotion restraining man from crime is fear, which keeps him from the impiety of straying from the middle path.

COMMENT: Orestes' plight is discussed not only in relation to the establishment of the Athenian court, but is here seen as a turning point in the history of law. The old law of revenge, under which survivors were obliged to shed blood to propitiate the spirit of a slain man, led to endless series of deaths, as the story of Agamemnon testifies. The justification for this old law is stated by the Furies. The aim of the old and new laws is the same: the preservation of social order; the means are different.

FOURTH EPISODE: Athena enters with twelve Athenian citizens. Announcing the establishment of the court, she says that the plaintiff shall speak first. The Furies question Orestes, who admits that he did indeed kill his mother. (This alone would have convicted him under the old law.) Orestes asks them why they did not try to avenge the death of Agamemnon. They say that the case did not come under their jurisdiction because Clytemnestra was not blood-kin to her husband. Apollo, appearing as a witness for Orestes, states (more emotionally than logically) that it was humiliating for a man as great as Agamemnon to be slain by the trickery of a woman. He draws particular attention to her deceit

when she enthusiastically welcomed him home. He makes a personal attack on the ugliness of the Furies, and then argues that the mother is not blood-kin of the child. She only nurses the seed of the father, who is the sole parent. As evidence he offers the birth of Athena, sprung full grown from Zeus' forehead. The arguments finished, Athena turns the case over to the jury, formally establishing the court of the Areopagus—to endure, she decrees, forever. While the jurors vote, both the Furies and Apollo threaten them with reprisals if the case is found against them. Just before the verdict is known, Athena announces that her vote is for Orestes if there is a tie. After counting the votes, a tie is announced and Orestes is free.

COMMENT: In the trial of Orestes a number of actual court practices appear. Before the trial, there is a preliminary hearing to decide jurisdiction; the defendant is allowed to speak last; acquittal follows a tie; instructions are given the jurors to remember their oaths as jurors; an "expert," Apollo, defines blood relationship; ad hominem arguments are used in Apollo's violent abuse of the Furies; and the threats of both sides are designed to intimidate the jurors.

Orestes thanks Athena and vows that the men of his city (Argos) will never declare war against her city (Athens). Orestes and Apollo leave.

COMMENT: Shortly before this play was written Athens and Argos had formed an alliance.

THIRD STASIMON: The Furies lament the overthrow of their ancient rights and threaten to destroy the land.

EXODOS: Athena offers a shrine to the Furies where they will be worshipped with sacrifices. They are reluctant to accept until she promises them the power to keep any house from prospering which does not worship them. They then promise not to bring blight, drouth, or famine to Athens. In alternate stanzas, the Furies and Athena celebrate the happy days to come for Athens now that the Furies, renamed the Kindly Ones (Eumenides), are to dispense favors instead of misfortune. Athena leads them in a joyful procession to their new home in a cave under the earth.

COMMENT: In this final scene, Orestes and his family are not mentioned at all, and their part in the trilogy reveals itself to be more symbolic than dramatic in the conventional sense. The point, of course, is that the dreadful fate pursuing the house of Atreus is fulfilled, and Orestes absolved from guilt. This is a symbolical liberation of all mankind from laws Aeschylus and other Athenians regarded as inimical to the general welfare.